

Thomas Klein / Ivo Ritzer / Peter W. Schulze (eds.)

Crossing Frontiers

Intercultural Perspectives on the Western

SCHÜREN

Contents

<i>Thomas Klein / Ivo Ritzer / Peter W. Schulze</i> Preface	7
<i>Edward Buscombe</i> Is the Western about American History?	13
<i>Ivo Ritzer</i> When the West(ern) Meets the East(ern) The Western <i>all'italiana</i> and its Asian Connections	25
<i>Harald Steinwender</i> The German Western beyond Karl May	58
<i>Marcus Stiglegger</i> «It's the singer, not the song» Notes on British Westerns (1960–1975)	77
<i>Gregory Mohr</i> The French Camargue-Western	87
<i>Natasza Korczarowska</i> Who Carries the Gun? Culture and Counterculture Elements in Polish Westerns	96
<i>Sergey Lavrentiev</i> Red Westerns	110
<i>Thomas Klein</i> Where the Wild West Can Be Staged Western Landscapes in International Cinema	121
<i>Stefan Zimmermann</i> «I suppose it has come to this ...» How a Western Shaped Australia's Identity	134

Contents

<i>Cassis Kilian</i> Une nouvelle vague: African Western Transformations	149
<i>Peter W. Schulze</i> Beyond Cowboys and Cangaceiros. Transculturations of the Western in Brazilian Cinema	163
Table of figures	194
Contributors	196

Preface

We have come a long way since the call to recognize the Western as a «serious object of study» (Frayling 2006: 25). Today, the Western is the most exhaustively annotated of all genres. There are approaches by seemingly every method in the humanities. Early poetological essays,¹ auteurist analyses,² structuralist attempts,³ psychoanalytical and feminist readings,⁴ broader cultural studies investigations,⁵ and to latest philosophical preoccupations⁶ have commented on the Western profoundly. In recent times, there is also an increased interest in intercultural relations between the Western as «the American cinema par excellence» (Rieupeyrou 1954) and other genres constituting national identities.⁷

Yet international research has mostly concentrated on the American Western. Apart from several publications about Italian and German Western, very few studies exist on intercultural transformations of the Western in other national cinemas. Considering the global influence of the Western – namely in Europe, Latin America, Asia, Africa and Australia – it is surprising how little attention the respective national variants of the American genre model have achieved. Most of these variants of the Western are still disregarded by academic research, especially in English language. The few existing publications mostly deal with specificities of the respective national genre, and focus less on the actual transformations of the American genre model. Broader comparative studies of intercultural transformations of the Western are a desideratum in genre research. The present book, based on a conference held at the Gutenberg University in Mainz in November 2009, extends the perspective to include Westerns mainly from Europe – England, France, Germany, Italy, Poland and USSR, but also from Australia, Brazil and Nigeria.

Edward Buscombe draws attention to the complex relationship between the Western and history, and questions if the genre actually deals with American his-

1 Rieupeyrou 1953; Warshow 1954; Bazin 1955; Agel 1961; Bellour 1966; French 1973.

2 Wood 1968; Budd 1976; Gallagher 1986; Pye 1996; Engel 2003; Cowie 2004; Loew 2005; Ritzer 2009; Steinwender 2009.

3 Kitses 1969; Wollen 1969; Cawelti 1975; Wright 1975; Fridlund 2006.

4 Willemen 1981; Lehman 1981; Cook 1998; Esders-Angermund 1997; Lucas 1998; Holmlund 2002.

5 Mitchell 1996; Coyne 1998; Neale 1998; Loy 2001; Walker 2001; Prats 2002; Corkin 2004; Weidinger 2006.

6 Böhringer 1998; McMahon / Csaki 2010.

7 Routt 2001; Van der Heide 2002; Eleftheriotis 2004. For early approaches in the same vein see Kaminsky 1972; Anderson 1973; Croizier 1983; Moeran 1985.

tory in a straightforward sense. Especially films made outside of the United States are not confined by American history, as is evident in Italian and German Westerns. In American B-Westerns, the frontier thesis has no place, and most of these films are hardly concerned with national history. On the other hand, the Western has been responsive to changes in political discourse, thus often reflecting contemporary history. Buscombe outlines what might be an alternative history of the Western which pays attention to subtexts that can be in contradiction with the overt politics of a film, such as gay sub-texts, racial politics, or Hispanic influences.

Like Buscombe, Ivo Ritzer challenges notions of 'purity' in national cinema. He undertakes a new consideration of the *western all'italiana*, arguing that it was never exclusively an Italian product but always figured as a project of transnational cooperations. Drawing on post-colonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Stuart Hall or Arjun Appadurai, the essay focuses on connections between Italian Westerns and Asian cinema, tracking the cultural flows of creative staff, generic traits, cinematic devices, financescapes, and narrative constructions. Ritzer not only shows that films such as *OGGI A ME ... DOMANI A TE! / TODAY WE KILL TOMORROW WE DIE!* (1968), *IL MIO NOME È SHANGAI JOE / THE FIGHTING FISTS OF SHANGAI JOE* (1973), or *EL KÁRATE, EL COLT Y EL IMPOSTOR / THE STRANGER AND THE GUNFIGHTER* (1974), are deeply open to ambivalence; he also makes a case for a new mode of film analysis, advocating a combination of cultural theory and mise-en-scène criticism and concentrating on cinematic representation layering symbolic meaning as well as disclosing ideological operations.

Harald Steinwender discusses the history of the Westerns (co-)produced in Germany from the silent era until the 1960s in context with other West European cinemas. Beginning with the silent period, there was a relatively steady production of Western movies, with its peak in the 1960s, the decade most thoroughly considered in the article. From the beginning, the American genre was transformed into films aiming at European audiences. In the 1960s, the diversification of German (co-)produced Western is most evident, ranging from naïve Karl May adaptations and hybrid Westerns by Wolf C. Hartwig to cynical *westerns all'italiana*.

Marcus Stiglegger discusses British Westerns, showing their differences in comparison to the US Western. Instead of focusing on mythology, the British Western features psychologically defined protagonists and frequently addresses moral questions. Furthermore, films such as *THE HUNTING PARTY* (1970) or *CHATO'S LAND* (1971) are characterized by nihilistic tendencies and highly graphic depictions of violence.

Gregory Mohr emphasizes the importance of the French Camargue Western produced by Pathé, as one of the earliest accounts of the Wild West in film history. Representing a quite large range of typical Western narratives, the Camargue Western was strongly connected with the actor Joë Hamman, who had travelled

to the United States. His knowledge of the Native American culture gave the films a sense of authenticity. Also the *mise-en-scène* of action sequences later became stereotypes of the genre, when the Western reached a phase of stabilization.

Natasza Korczarowska considers Polish variations of the Western as torn between dominant ideology and counterculture elements in the former East-ern bloc. Becoming the most popular form of entertainment in the 1960s, Polish Westerns were meant to reinforce the official party line. Yet films such as *RANCZO TEXAS / THE TEXAS RANCH* (1959), *PRAWO I PIĘŚĆ / THE LAW AND THE FIST* (1964), *WLIZE ECHA / THE ECHOES OF THE WOLVES* (1968), or *WSYSCY I NIKT / EVERYBODY AND NOBODY* (1978), managed to subvert their supposed ideological mandate. Set in the Bieszczady Mountains or the so-called Regained Territories after World War II, the films introduce parody and moral ambivalence, stimulating the repressed imagination of socialist Poland.

Sergey Lavrentiev gives a historical account of Western adaptations in the former USSR. He points out that the US Western was considered as a reactionary genre, yet proved to be very popular with Russian audiences as well as authorities. So the party leaders decided to produce ideologically ‘correct’ socialist Westerns, often modelled after *THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN* (1960), and staged in the Civil War between 1918 and 1921, focusing on the heroic adventures of the Bolshevik Red Army. Lavrentiev shows that the Soviet Western can be regarded as a mirror of Russian society in the 20th century.

Thomas Klein shows that landscape as one of the most important iconographic elements in the Western genre is a basis for various national cinemas to invent their own Western narratives and iconographies. Accordingly, the Brazilian *Cangaceiro* genre or Australian variations of the Western use native landscapes intensively, to build a national identity by telling stories situated in the respective country’s past. The European Western mainly used European landscapes to tell Western stories situated in the US American past. In a brief case study, the article analyses the use of landscape in the *DEFA-Indianerfilme* which is strongly connected with the representation of the Indians as the natural and productive inhabitants of the continent colonized by a capitalist society.

Reflecting appropriate genre theories of the Western, Stefan Zimmermann discusses the importance of the Australian Ned Kelly myth as a Western narrative. In the light of Roland Barthes’ notion of myth, Ned Kelly is analysed as an Australian variation of an outlaw, deeply rooted in Australian historical past, a time in the second half of the 19th century which was shaped by the appearance of bushrangers. Ned Kelly was the last and most prominent bushranger who reached the status of a social bandit. Beginning with the first ever made feature film of the world, *THE STORY OF THE KELLY GANG* (1906) and ending with Gregor Jordan’s *NED KELLY* (2003) featuring Heath Ledger, Zimmermann retraces the development of Ned Kelly as a national icon and a national commodity.

Cassis Kilian discusses Western transformations in two African films, Jean Rouch's *MOI, UN NOIR* (Côte d'Ivoire / F 1958) and Moustapha Alassane's *LE RETOUR D'UN AVENTURIER* (Niger/F 1965/66). Both films, the first released in the colonial era and the second after independence, show how young Africans used the Western to express themselves in their specific social situation. In doing so, especially Alassane's film reaches a rich performativity in Judith Butler's sense of the word. The Western is used as a playing field to put the difference of reality and fiction into question.

Peter W. Schulze gives a comprehensive survey of ‹transculturations› of the Western in Brazilian cinema, focussing on the national-specific genre of the *nordestern* or *filme de cangaceiro*. Against the backdrop of the historical figure of the *cangaceiro* and its representation in different cultural productions, the history of the genre is outlined. Special attention is drawn to generic matrices and to manifold filmic transformations – not only of the US-American Western and the *western all'italiana*, but also of certain Mexican films and of other genres such as the Brazilian *pornochanchada* or the Hong Kong martial-arts film. In its dialectics of transnational adaptation and national affirmation, the *nordestern* reflects different expressions of Brazilian cultural identity, with filmic representations ranging from ‹glocal› hybrid mainstreaming to the assertion of a radical particularity.

The editors wish to thank the ZIS – Centre of Intercultural Studies at the Johannes Gutenberg University for their funding of the conference and this book; Gregory Mohr for helping with the organisation of the conference; and Sabine Froesa for proofreading.

Bibliography

- Agel, Henri (ed.) (1961), *Le Western*. Paris.
- Anderson, J.L. (1973), «Japanese Swordfighters and American Gunfighters». In *Cinéma Journal* 2/1974, 1–21.
- Bazin, André (1955), «Evolution du Western». In *Cahiers du Cinéma* 9/1955, 22–26.
- Bellour, Raymond (ed.) (1966), *Le Western. Sources, Mythes, Auteurs, Acteurs, Filmographies*. Paris.
- Böhringer, Hannes (1998), *Auf dem Rücken Amerikas. Eine Mythologie der neuen Welt im Western und Gangsterfilm*. Berlin.
- Budd, Michael (1976), «A Home in the Wilderness: Visual Imagery in John Ford's Westerns». In *Cinema Journal* 16/1976, 62–75.
- Cawelti, John G. (1975), *The Six-Gun Mystique*. Bowling Green.
- Corkin, Stanley (2004), *Cowboys as Cold Warriors. The Western and U.S. History*. Philadelphia.
- Cowie, Peter (2004), *John Ford and the American West*. New York.

- Coyne, Michael (1997), *The Crowded Prairie: American National Identity in the Hollywood Western*. London / New York.
- Croizier, Ralph C. (1983), «Beyond the East and the West. The American Western and the Rise of the Chinese Swordplay Movie». In *The Journal of Popular Film* 3/1983, 229–243.
- Eleftheriotis, Dimitris (2004), «Spaghetti Western, Genre Criticism and National Cinema: Re-defining the Frame of Reference». In Tasker, Yvonne (ed.), *Action and Adventure Cinema*. London, 309–328.
- Engel, Leonard (2003), *Sam Peckinpah's West. New Perspectives*. Salt Lake City.
- Esders-Angermund, Karin (1997), *Weiblichkeit und sexuelle Differenz im amerikanischen Genrekino. Funktionen der Frau im frühen Westernfilm*. Trier.
- Frayling, Christopher (2006), *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone*. London / New York.
- French, Philip (1973), *Westerns: Aspects of a Movie Genre*. London.
- Fridlund, Bert (2006), *The Spaghetti Western: A Thematic Analysis*. Jefferson / NC.
- Gallagher, Tag (1986), *John Ford. The Man and His Films*. Berkeley.
- Holmlund, Chris (2002), «Nouveaux Western for the 1990s. Genre Offshoot, Audience Reroutes». In *Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies*. London / New York, 51–67.
- Kaminsky, Stuart M. (1972), «The Samurai Film and the Western». In *Journal of Popular Film & TV* 4/1972, 312–324.
- Kitses, Jim (1969), *Horizons West: Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, Sam Peckinpah: Studies of Authorship within the Western*. Bloomington.
- Lehman, Peter (1981), *Looking at Look's Missing Reverse Shot: Psychoanalysis and Style in John Ford's THE SEARCHERS*. In *Wide Angle* 4/1981, 65–70.
- Loew, Dirk C. (2005), *Versuch über John Ford. Die Westernfilme 1939–1964*. Norderstedt.
- Loy, R. Philip (2001), *Westerns and American Culture, 1930–1955*. Jefferson / NC.
- McMahon, Jennifer L. and B. Steve Csaki (eds.) (2010), *The Philosophy of the Western*. Lexington.
- Mitchell, Lee Clark (1996), *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film*. Chicago.
- Neale, Steve (1998), «Vanishing Americans: Racial and Ethnic Issues in the Interpretation and Context of Post-war «Pro-Indian» Westerns». In Buscombe, Edward and Roberta Pearson (eds.), *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western*. London, 8–28.
- Prats, Armando José (2002), *Invisible Natives. Myth and Identity in the American Western*. Ithaca.
- Pye, Douglas (1996), «The Collapse of Fantasy: Masculinity and the Westerns of Anthony Mann». In Pye, Douglas and Ian Cameron (eds.): *The Book of Westerns*. London.
- Rieuepeyrou, Jean-Louis (1953), *Le Western ou le cinéma américain par excellence*. Paris.
- Ritzer, Ivo (2009), *Walter Hill. Welt in Flammen*. Berlin.
- Routt, William D. (2001), «More Australian than Aristotelian. The Australian Bushranger Film 1904–1914». www.archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/01/18/oz_Western [12.10.2011]
- Steinwender, Harald (2009), *Sergio Leone. Es war einmal in Europa*. Berlin.

- Van der Heide, William (2002), *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film: Border Crossings and National Cultures*. Amsterdam.
- Walker, Janet (ed.) (2001), *Westerns: Films through History*. London / New York.
- Warshow, Robert (1954), «Movie Chronicle: The Westerner». In *Partisan Review* 2/1954, 190–203.
- Weidinger, Martin (2006), *Nationale Mythen – männliche Helden. Politik und Geschlecht im amerikanischen Western*. Frankfurt/M.
- Willeman, Paul (1981), «Anthony Mann: Looking at the Male». In *Framework* 15–17/1981, 16–20.
- Wollen, Peter (1969), *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. BFI/ Secker and Warburg.
- Wood, Robin (1968), *Howard Hawks*. London.
- Wright, Will (1975), *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*. Berkeley.

Is the Western about American History?

Is the Western genre essentially and always a discourse about American history? Many have argued that it is so. In *Horizons West*, Jim Kitses states baldly (1969: 8): «First of all, the western is American history. Needless to say, this does not mean that the films are historically accurate or that they cannot be made by Italians. More simply, the statement means that American frontier life provides the milieu and *mores* of the western...». ¹ Phil Hardy in his Western encyclopedia, claims that «the Western is fixed in history in a relatively straightforward way». ² This is true in the narrow sense. Westerns often begin by identifying a time and a place; thus *THE SEARCHERS* (1956) opens with the title: «Texas 1868». In many other films, while the time and place may not be identified quite so specifically, it's clear that we are in the middle of the nineteenth century (we can tell from the costumes and décor) and somewhere in the United States (we can tell from the landscape). More precisely, the action takes place, in the overwhelming majority of films, in the United States west of the Mississippi, and not just generally in the nineteenth century, but in a limited period identified roughly as that between the end of the Civil War in 1865, and the so-called «closing of the frontier» in 1890.

However, the Western presents a somewhat skewed version of American history. The Civil War, the single most traumatic event in America's past, is directly dealt with in only a handful of Westerns, despite occurring at a time almost contemporaneous with the action of most of the films. The real-life characters who people Western films, such as Billy the Kid, Jesse James or Wyatt Earp, rate scarcely a footnote in the standard histories of America. Even General Custer, the subject of several major Western films, was perhaps less important in the history of the Indian Wars than Generals Sheridan or Crook.

But it's not so much a question of specific events or individuals; rather, the Western, many critics have argued, is underpinned by a meta-narrative of history which focuses on the concept of the frontier, the line marking the furthest point west of white settlement. Concepts such as the clash between «civilisation» and «savagery», or the nature of law and order, or ideas of masculinity appropriate to such a frontier society, can all be found to inform a large number of films.

1 In the later, much expanded edition of this book, published in 2004, this statement does not appear.

2 Quoted in Langford 2005: 62.

The founding concept of the established version of the history of the West was Frederick Jackson Turner's formulation, advanced in 1903, of the frontier as an area of free land which functioned as a kind of safety valve for the pressures which acted upon American society. Social and economic tensions were relieved by the constant stream of migration westward, a migration that created a new kind of society, independent, creative, highly practical, egalitarian and, argued Turner, quintessentially American. The frontier was thus seen in a wholly optimistic and positive way, both the source and the manifestation of American exceptionalism, and its movement westward was a story of progress. It is this vision of the frontier which is central to America's conception of itself as a forward-looking, progressive society (cf. Turner 1961).

But soon after the time that film scholars were turning to issues around the Western and history, the history of the American west itself was undergoing a series of revisions. By the 1980s a new generation of historians was questioning Turner's thesis (cf. for example Limerick 1987). It depended, for instance, on the assumption that the land into which the whites were expanding was 'free' and empty. This ignored the fact that most of it was already occupied, by a combination of indigenous people and Hispanics, whose prior claims to the land were then overturned by conquest. The Turnerian view of the frontier also paid scant attention to the position of women and minorities. And its easy assumptions that westward expansion was a success story were belied by many catastrophic failures and a rapacious capitalism which wreaked havoc on the natural environment.

From this perspective, if the Western expresses a Turnerian view of the frontier, then it can be attacked for its reactionary ideology, for promoting a myth of the West rather than portraying things as they really were, a fantasy, not true history.³ If it is indeed about America, it presents a distorted view of it. Westerns can be seen as supporting a racist, sexist, even homophobic view of American society, and on the surface that would seem to be self-evidently true. But a more subtle critique of some Westerns leads to the questioning of such easy assumptions. Some landmark films may be analysed in a more sophisticated manner, acknowledging perhaps their failure to confront full-on the politically reactionary nature of the genre, but finding ways in which they may nevertheless redeem themselves by undercurrents which run counter to the perceived ideological thrust. Thus for example John Ford's *THE SEARCHERS* (1956) has as its hero Ethan Edwards, a man implacably opposed to Indians, to the point that he resolves to murder his niece when he supposes her to have assimilated into the Comanche. But the word 'hero' is something of a misnomer, because it is clear that Ethan's behaviour is by no means endorsed by other characters in the film, nor is he himself able to sustain his murderous impulses. Ethan is a highly complex character, and his inconsistencies throw into relief the

3 See the critique of the Western's view of women in Tompkins 1992.



1 John Wayne in *Rio BRAVO*
(1959)

whole question of racial identity, challenging any easy assumption that the classical Western leans wholly towards a hostile view of Indians.

In a similar mode, Howard Hawks's *RIO BRAVO* (1959) would seem to present a wholly masculine world in which a small group of heroes unite in a common endeavour, one in which feminine virtues would appear to have little place. On the surface, the role of Feathers, the saloon singer played by Angie Dickinson who entrances Sheriff John T. Chance (John Wayne; fig. 1), would appear to be wholly stereotypical, another in the long line of women of easy virtue who populate the Western. But Feathers is very much her own woman, and manages to run rings round the Sheriff in the world of the emotions, where she takes all the initiatives and wins all the battles.

Looking for Westerns which directly challenge the pre-eminent role of men is not a particularly fruitful avenue to pursue, since such films are few and far between. *THE BALLAD OF LITTLE JO* (1993) is an honourable exception, but films like *BAD GIRLS* (1994) and *THE QUICK AND THE DEAD* (1995) offer no more than a comic-book approach. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it might be possible to write an alternative history of the Western which, far from castigating it for its perceived ideological shortcomings, would pay attention to subtexts which can be in contradiction with the overt politics of a film. A start has already been made on this work,



2 Joan Crawford and Sterling Hayden in *JOHNNY GUITAR* (1954)

as I have indicated. Critics such as Pam Cook (1988) have suggested a series of alternative feminist readings of such films as *DODGE CITY* (1939), *PURSUED* (1947), *RANCHO NOTORIOUS* (1952) and *CALAMITY JANE* (1953). *JOHNNY GUITAR* (1954; fig. 2) has become something of a locus classicus of how women's roles in the Western may undercut the apparent domination of masculine values.

The same kind of strategy might be employed in dealing with the Western's seemingly exclusive pre-occupation with heterosexuality. Virtually no Westerns (with the exception of the eccentric Andy Warhol movie *LONESOME COWBOYS* [1968] and a number of pornographic features) have challenged head-on the anti-gay bias, at least not until *BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN* (2005). But in a genre that depends so heavily on relationships between men, the possibilities for readings which uncover gay sub-texts must surely be considerable.

The question of the Western's racial politics is a complex one. I have already suggested that some films can be read in ways that subvert easy assumptions about the Western being racist. But there is also a long history within the Western of films that consciously attempt to deal «sympathetically» with the Indian. Some of D.W. Griffith's early Biograph films offer a view of a pre-conquest world in which Indians live in a happy idyll not yet threatened by white invasion. Occasional films of the

twenties and thirties, such as *THE VANISHING AMERICAN* (1925), tried to put a pro-Indian point of view, and *BROKEN ARROW* (1950) was just one of a number of films in the 1950s which adopted a «liberal» perspective. It's interesting to trace, as some critics have done, the relationship between such films and changes in public discourse about the so-called «Indian problem» in the US; see for example Steve Neale's essay on liberal Westerns (Neal 1998), and my own account of *BROKEN ARROW* in *Injuns! Native Americans in the Movies* (Buscombe 2006). It's clear that liberal attitudes do not appear in the Western out of nowhere, and that the Western has frequently been responsive to changes in political discourse.

Critics of the Turner frontier thesis made much of the fact that Turner largely ignored the experience of the Hispanic people who inhabited the West before the arrival of Americans, and continued (and continue) to co-exist with them. But if on first viewing Western movies seem to exist in a WASP-world, in which the Hispanic heritage is excluded or at least marginalised, a closer look shows that there is much more influence than one might think. Ten years ago, in the introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Back in the Saddle Again*, I wrote:

«John Ford's Westerns are packed with Hispanic references. *MY DARLING CLEMENTINE* [fig. 3] is a film about Wyatt Earp, a quintessential WASP figure, at least as portrayed in the movies. But the entire town of Tombstone is pervaded by Hispanics. Not only is the Mexican woman Chihuahua central to the film's symbolic structure (East/West, garden/desert, respectability/open sexuality). At the town theatre, a Mexican woman sells enchiladas, the musicians in the saloon where the Earps drink are Mexicans, the actor Thorndike is tormented by the Clantons in a Mexican cantina, even the man who holds Wyatt Earp's horse as he mounts to ride off after Doc Holliday is a Mexican. The Spanish language and Mexican music are woven in and out of the soundtrack. Nor is this Ford's only film with such a strong Hispanic influence. 3 *GODFATHERS*, *THE SEARCHERS*, *TWO RODE TOGETHER* have equally strong



3 Henry Fonda and Cathy Downs in *MY DARLING CLEMENTINE* (1946)

Hispanic elements. Indeed, there is a long essay if not a whole book to be written on what might be called «the South-western», the Western as expressive of Hispanic cultural survival. The title of this volume, *Back in the Saddle Again*, is a reference to Gene Autry's theme song, first recorded in 1939. The following year Autry had another hit with *El Rancho Grande*. This song had previously featured in the Mexican film of 1936, *ALLA EN AL RANCHO GRANDE*, which inaugurated the Mexican sub-genre of the Western, the *comedia ranchera*. Half the words of the song Autry sings in the original Spanish, a fact not much noticed in all that has been written on the theme of multiculturalism in the cinema.» (Buscombe/Pearson 1998: 6–7)

If I may say so, that seems to me no less pertinent than it was ten years ago. Indeed, the Hispanic heritage of American cinema has become even more marked in such recent quasi-Westerns as *LONE STAR* (1996), *ALL THE PRETTY HORSES* (2000) and *THE THREE BURIALS OF MELQUIADES ESTRADA* (2005), all of them explorations of a cross-border culture, previously found not only in John Ford but in such significant Westerns as *THE WONDERFUL COUNTRY* (1959). Thus the contestation of what exactly constitutes America is an ongoing struggle. The long essay or book I called for is still there waiting to be written by someone with the right cross-cultural credentials.

Thus it is evident that the relationship between the Western and history is not a straightforward one. It's certainly not a matter of a simple «reflection», of the West-



4 Horst Buchholz and Yul Brynner in *THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN* (1960)



5 Ben Johnson, Warren Oates, William Holden and Ernest Borgnine in *THE WILD BUNCH* (1969)

ern seeking simply to recreate the past. You can be sure that if a Western begins by telling you that this is at last the «real story» of Jesse James or Wyatt Earp, then what we are in for is yet another piece of myth-making. Moreover, if the Western often uses the «facts» of history as its raw material (the Indian wars, the construction of the railroad, the growth of the cattle industry), the significance of those facts, the meaning that is extracted from them, is likely to owe far more to social ideas current at the time the film was made than those typical of the time of its setting. As Jack Nachbar writes: «the subject matter of Westerns has usually been the historical West after 1850, but the real emotional and ideological subject matter has invariably been the issues of the era in which films were released.»⁴ Thus *THE SEARCHERS* has been read not as a discourse on relations between white settlers and Native Americans on the early frontier, but as a thinly disguised treatment of the struggle for civil rights in America in the 1950s.

There have already been a number of book-length studies of the Western which have read films not in terms of what they have to say about American society in the past, but rather in terms of the films' relation to what was happening in American society at the time of their production. One such study that comes to mind is Stanley Corkin's recent book *Cowboys as Cold Warriors: The Western and US History*, tracing connections between some of the Westerns produced in the forties and fifties and America's role in international politics at the time (Corkin 2004). Richard Slotkin's book *Gunfighter Nation* has a similar focus, if on a wider scale, on the connections between Westerns and American public policy, for example in

4 Jack Nachbar quoted in Langford 2005: 72.

his analysis of films like *THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN* (fig. 4) and *THE WILD BUNCH* (fig. 5) in relation to the Vietnam war (Slotkin 1992).

Much of this work is genuinely illuminating. But all too often I find the theoretical model with which critics are working has serious defects. What is rarely explained is just how ideas which may be current in the wider society find their way into films. The assumption, somehow, is that they are simply absorbed by film-makers, that certain ideas are ‹in the wind› and get picked up by film-makers, who transfer them directly into films. Critical analysis seems to somehow short-circuit the specific organizational and institutional practices which must surely be involved and through which these ideas are mediated.

The history which makes its presence felt in the Western does not necessarily have to be political history in the narrow sense. I take it as axiomatic that all cultural products, including the Western genre, have a history, a history, moreover, that is produced by human beings, even if they often do so without full consciousness of what they are doing. I have in some of my own work tried to show how certain elements of the Western, such as the way landscape is used and what sort of meanings it has in films, can be understood as the result of a process whose origins lie in the historical past, even before the Western film came into existence. Thus nineteenth-century American painting and photography was initially influenced by European ideas of the sublime. Artists went west to paint the Rocky Mountains because they found in them many of the qualities which European artists had found in the Alps or other European landscapes. But in the second half of the nineteenth century, under the pressure of an emerging nationalism, American artists sought to develop an authentic American landscape aesthetic based on scenery which was specific to America and not merely reminiscent of European vistas. Instead of mountains, American artists such as Thomas Moran began to paint the deserts and canyons of the southwest, producing a ‹desert aesthetic› which eventually fed into popular notions of what was a typical western American landscape. The best-selling novels of Zane Grey, whose *Riders of the Purple Sage* was published in 1912, were mostly set in the southwest and featured elaborate descriptions of scenery. Many of Grey's novels were filmed, mostly in the late teens and early 1920s, and did much to create the vogue for desert landscapes in the movie Western. Though mountains and plains do feature (for example in the Western of Anthony Mann), it is overwhelmingly the scenery of Arizona, Utah or Nevada which provides the most common and typical locations for Hollywood's Western films (Buscombe 1995).

Interestingly, Italian Westerns for the most part adopt the same type of scenery, arid, sun-drenched, rocky, and hostile to settlement. Many of these films were of course shot in Spain, particularly in the semi-desert region around Almería. To what extent it is the choice of location that influenced the landscape, and to what extent it is the desire for a particular kind of landscape that dictated the choice of location, is an interesting question that might repay further investigation. By

contrast, the West German Westerns of the 1960s preferred mountain scenery. One might pose the same question; which was cause and which was effect? It may be simply that mountains were the scenery to hand in the locations chosen, but the influence of an earlier generation of German mountain films surely cannot be overlooked. East German Westerns, on the other hand, employ both mountain and desert scenery, the former for those films based on the novels of James Fenimore Cooper (which are set in the wooded country of upper New York State, at the time of the action still frontier country), and deserts for films such as *ULZANA* (1974), set in the southwest of America.

Some kinds of Westerns appear to avoid history altogether, at least at first glance. The frontier thesis has no place in the B-Western, a sub-genre which played an important part in Hollywood production up until the 1950s. Peter Stanfield has produced two books which have contributed much to our understanding of the hitherto neglected and despised B-feature (Stanfield 2001 and Stanfield 2002). In doing so he has shown that the simple assertion that the Western genre as a whole is about the Turnerian view of American history is not sustainable. One or two of the Westerns starring Gene Autry or Roy Rogers (the two most successful B-Western stars of the thirties and forties) do have a setting in the historical past. But most of them take place in a never-never land in which the historical trappings of the Western such as horses and six-guns exist side by side with modern inventions such as the motor car and the telephone, and, most importantly for singing cowboys, the phonograph.

The B-feature Westerns which Stanfield examines are never about the historical themes which preoccupy the A-feature, themes we may group under the rubric of <the winning of the west>. At first sight it seems the B-Western is innocent of any kind of historical discourse. But as Stanfield shows, it deals instead with issues highly pertinent to the time when they were made. Thus several of Gene Autry films of the 30s and early 40s concern families who are being dispossessed of their ranches or other property, or who are suffering economically through the unscrupulous activities of large, faceless corporations. In this way the B-Western reflects the concerns of a generation scarred by mass unemployment and the experience of the dustbowl. Thus, if not about history in the conventional sense, the B-Western is no less pertinent to America.

But what of the many hundreds of Westerns which have been made outside of the United States? Does the form of the genre dictate the themes? Is it necessarily the case that because a film follows the conventions of the Western that it is inevitably telling a story which relates to America? The first thing that needs to be said is that the idea of the West has had a profound influence on many different cultures. In Europe especially, the idea of the American West as a location of adventure and dramatic conflict spread rapidly during the nineteenth century. The concept of the <noble savage> living in an idyllic natural world also held great attraction to the

European, weary of his/her own hidebound and rigid society. Scores of European novelists, most famously the German Karl May, mined the West as a subject for stirring tales, while American authors such as James Fenimore Cooper were translated into several European languages, with great success. Real-life spectacles representing life in the West were hugely popular in Europe, with Buffalo Bill's Wild West travelling to Britain, France, Spain, Italy, Austria, Hungary and Germany around the turn of the century. Other such shows got as far as Russia and Sweden.

By the time the movies arrived, the Wild West was an established part of popular culture, in Europe and elsewhere. It's not surprising, therefore, that European film industries should have begun to produce Westerns of their own. There were already thirty or so Western films made in Britain before 1915. The French were particularly keen, and Pathé was soon producing Westerns which found great popularity even in the United States itself. Later episodes of Western production in Europe are well enough known: the 'Indianerfilme' of DEFA, the East German film studio, the West German films based on the novels of Karl May, and of course the so-called 'spaghetti' Westerns from Italy in the 1960s.

In what sense are these films representative of an authentic European culture, and to what extent are they merely imitations of Hollywood Westerns, with similar thematic concerns? If we look back to the nineteenth century, to the novels and dramas and pictorial representations that were consumed by Europeans in such huge quantities, it's apparent that what was being articulated was a kind of dialectical relationship between Europe and America. For the European reader, America functioned as an ideal, as in many ways the opposite of Europe. What these stories emphasised was, firstly, the emptiness of the United States. Its prairies and mountains and deserts seemed limitless, such a contrast to the tightly settled landscapes of most European countries. Secondly, the society of the frontier appeared, certainly in comparison to Europe, free and fluid. Instead of the hidebound, class-bound social structures of Europe, America seemed to offer a land full of opportunity, where people might build an independent life for themselves. That many were to be disillusioned when they discovered that America was not without its own distinctions, of race and colour, of sex or economic power, did not lessen the appeal of the myth.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that European Westerns capitalised on the already powerful appeal of the American frontier, it is possible to argue that they do display specific European features which make them more than just imitations of the American originals. Consider, for example, the role played by Indians in both German and Italian Westerns. In the latter, the original inhabitants of the frontier scarcely appear at all. In fact, with one or two exceptions, such as Leone's *ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST*, a film at least half-Hollywood, the Italian Western is little concerned with historical themes relating to the nineteenth century West. In so far as there is an interest in ideological issues, they centre on the unequal struggle

of the weak against the strong, often represented as poor peasants, especially Mexicans, battling against unscrupulous landowners and their hired gunmen, a kind of class struggle which seems to relate more to contemporary Italian politics than to American, as perceived by predominantly leftist writers and directors, and with an occasional dose of anti-clericalism thrown in, something quite foreign to the American Western.

By contrast, German Westerns, both East and West, feature Indians prominently, following their dominant sources, the novels of James Fenimore Cooper and Karl May respectively. In the Hollywood Western, whether the films are liberal or reactionary, Indians are always a «problem», the underlying concern being, how can they ultimately be integrated into American society? In the DEFA Westerns from East Germany, Indians function instead as representatives of the third world struggling against the imperialist Yankees. For German audiences, it has also been suggested, Indians can also stand as honorary Teutons, allowing Germans to «refuse the role of perpetrator in racial aggression. Indian impersonation [or identification] thus facilitated the work of [postwar] restitution, by allowing Germans to explore alternative [to Nazi] notions of ethnic differences and to reject learned concepts of Aryan supremacy» (Buscombe 2006: 216).

Indians have also been seen as «green», offering an alternative to consumer capitalism. Germans' fondness not only for watching Indians in the cinema, but going further by even dressing up as Indians in organised clubs «allowed club members to express fear of modernization, grief over geographical and social displacement, and mourning of lost indigenous traditions, but also to validate and celebrate a past marked by rural artisan lifeways and a primarily oral culture» (Buscombe 2006: 217).

This may be placing a heavier burden of representation on these films than they are able to bear. But it does show that the European Western, and by extension the Latin American and other geographically displaced Westerns, are capable of meanings which are not confined by American history, and in particular by its frontier myth.

Bibliography

- Buscombe, Edward (1995), «Inventing Monument Valley: Nineteenth-Century Landscape Photography and the Western Film». In Petro, Patrice (ed.), *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*. Bloomington.
- Buscombe, Edward (2006), *Injuns! Native Americans in the Movies*. London.
- Buscombe, Edward and Roberta Pearson (1998) (eds.), *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western*. London.

- Cook, Pam (1988), «Women» In Buscombe, Edward (ed.), *The BFI Companion to the Western*. London, 240–3.
- Corkin, Stanley (2004), *Cowboys as Cold Warriors: The Western and U.S. History*. Philadelphia.
- Kitses, Jim (1969), *Horizons West*. London.
- Langford, Barry (2005), *Film Genre: Hollywood and Beyond*. Edinburgh.
- Limerick, Patricia Nelson (1987), *The Legacy of Conquest. The Unbroken Past of the American West*. New York.
- Neale, Steve (1998), «Vanishing Americans: Racial and Ethnic Issues in the Interpretation and Context of Post-war «Pro-Indian» Westerns». In Buscombe, Edward and Roberta Pearson (eds.), *Back in the Saddle Again: New Essays on the Western*. London, 8–28.
- Slotkin, Richard (1992), *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. New York.
- Stanfield, Peter (2001), *Hollywood, Westerns and the 1930s: The Lost Trail*. Exeter.
- Stanfield, Peter (2002), *Horse Opera: The Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy*. Urbana and Chicago.
- Tompkins, Jane (1992), *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*. New York.
- Turner, Frederick Jackson (1961), *Frontier and Section: Selected Essays*. Edited by Ray Allen Billington. Englewood Cliffs, NJ.